

OBSERVATIONS OF BIRD SPECIES AT PELICAN POINT, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

Many waders spend the summer months along the coasts and rivers of south-western Australia and migrate along the eastern coasts of Asia to breed in the northern hemisphere in May to August. Recently international agreements have been signed between Australia, China and Japan to protect these birds and this has led to renewed interest in their distribution.

Pelican Point (Point Currie), a sandy spit projecting into the Swan River estuary at Crawley, is a popular roosting place for waders in the summer months. A description of the area and its bird life was published by Serventy (1938). He visited the area almost daily in 1936, at a time when samphire marshes west of the point were being filled in. Later Job (1972) monitored birds for 2 years from November 1966 to November 1968. Over the past 20 years records of the waders and water birds at the point have been taken more or less weekly by one of us (MB). In order to observe changes that have occurred in this time, details have been extracted for two periods each of two years (July 1971-June 1973 and July 1985-June 1987). These have been compared with records taken by Serventy and Job and also with early lists of birds recorded for the larger Swan River District by Alexander (1921).

HABITAT DESCRIPTION

Pelican Point is a triangular area of about 2 hectares on the northern shore of the Swan River estuary. Since 1976 it has been separated from the adjacent open space by a fence 500 m long which limits access by the general public. There is a sandy beach along two sides that front onto the river and the area includes a small lagoon which used to drain into the river in the first period but has since become isolated. The low dunes along the river are now grassed and further inland shrubs such as *Acacia saligna* and the introduced tea tree *Leptospermum laevigatum* are becoming established. Along the fence line and beyond are *Callitris preissii*, *Casuarina glauca*, *Eucalyptus rudis* and *Melaleuca cuticularis* and in addition a number of other small trees which have been recently planted. The lagoon, which has swampy ground to the west, is surrounded by reeds and some samphire.

METHODS

Records of numbers of species of birds at Pelican Point were made at least once a week in summer, usually at 5.30 p.m. on a weekday; in winter (May-August) visits were made in most weeks. In the first period (1971/73) accurate records of waterbirds and waders were obtained though some other species were noted; in the second period (1985/87) all species seen within the reserve were recorded. All records for one week were pooled and the number of weeks in which a species was seen was expressed as a percentage of the number of weeks in which observations were made.

Table 1: Species of water birds recorded at Pelican Point. Figures are the % of weeks that the species were seen. Under Serventy and Job + indicates that the species were recorded by them.

	Serventy	Job	% weeks species seen			
	1936	66/68	71/72	72/73	85/86	86/87
Hoary-headed Grebe	+	+	2	0	0	0
Pelican	+	+	36	39	65	67
Darter	0	+	0	4	13	19
Pied Cormorant	+	+	40	45	3	6
Little Pied Cormorant	+	+	71	69	68	86
Great Cormorant	+	+	26	27	32	50
Little Black Cormorant	+	+	45	41	55	56
White-faced Heron	+	+	12	2	6	3
Great Egret	0	0	0	2	0	3
Rufous Night Heron	0	0	2	2	6	8
Sacred Ibis	0	0	0	0	3	3
Yellow-billed Spoonbill	0	0	0	0	0	3
Black Swan	+	+	5	8	13	3
Mountain Duck	+	+	2	12	42	25
Black Duck	+	+	50	31	68	72
Mallard	0	0	0	0	3	3
Grey Teal	+	+	62	35	94	36
Spotted Crake	0	0	0	0	10	0
Pied Oystercatcher	0	0	0	0	0	6
Grey Plover	+	+	86	73	68	67
Golden Plover	+	+	0	0	3	0
Hooded Plover	+	0	0	2	0	0
Large Sand Plover	+	+	19	0	3	0
Red-capped Plover	+	+	50	53	87	86
Black-winged Stilt	+	+	50	53	97	75
Banded Stilt	+	0	2	0	0	3
Red-necked Avocet	+	+	33	14	84	33
Ruddy Turnstone	0	+	0	0	3	0
Common Sandpiper	+	+	0	10	19	44
Greenshank	+	0	29	22	32	33
Terek Sandpiper	+	+	2	0	0	3
Bar-tailed Godwit	+	+	55	49	23	14
Red Knot	0	+	33	39	10	3
Great Knot	+	+	5	2	6	8
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	+	+	17	31	19	11
Red-necked Stint	+	+	71	49	90	56
Curlew Sandpiper	+	+	48	47	58	22
Sanderling	+	0	0	0	0	3
Silver Gull	+	+	98	100	97	100
Whiskered Tern	+	+	0	0	3	0
Caspian Tern	+	+	88	88	97	89
Fairy Tern	+	+	31	20	23	22
Crested Tern	+	+	86	78	87	83
Number of weeks visited (100%)			42	49	31	36

Note: Common names follow *Field Guide to the Birds of Western Australia* by G.M. Storr & R.E. Johnstone. W.A. Museum, Perth (1979)

RESULTS

The species of water birds recorded at Pelican Point are shown in Table 1 which also indicates whether they were seen by Serventy (1938) and Job (1972). Overall there seems to have been an increase in species seen between 1971/73 and 1985/87 and a marked increase in occurrence of 9 species (Pelican, Darter, Great Cormorant, Mountain Duck, Black Duck, Grey Teal, Red-capped Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Red-necked Avocet and Common Sandpiper) but all these species were seen by the earlier observers. Pied Oystercatchers and Sacred Ibis were only seen in the second period. Numbers of observations on 3 species have declined markedly (Pied Cormorant, Bar-tailed Godwit and Red Knot). Other species have changed little including a number of infrequent visitors such as Rufous Night Heron, Australian Crake, Banded Stilt, Ruddy Turnstone and Terek Sandpiper.

Numbers of birds seen varied from single individuals of Common Sandpiper to many hundreds of Red-necked Stint and Silver Gull.

Twenty two other bird species were seen in 1985/1987 (Table 2). Three species (Welcome Swallow, Singing Honeyeater and Laughing Dove) were seen on more than 80% of weeks and 2 species (Brown Honeyeater and Tree Martin) about 50%. Of these only the Brown Honeyeater was not seen by Job. The White-fronted Chat was not recorded in 1985/87 but was seen in 1971/73 and by Job in 1966/68. The only bird of prey seen in both 1971/73 and 1985/1987 was the Australian Kestrel (5% and 2% of weeks) whereas the Black-shouldered Kite was observed in 15% of weeks in 1985/87 but not in 1971/73.

Table 2: Other species of birds recorded weekly at Pelican Point in 1985-87. Birds seen in 1966-68 (Job 1972) and in 1971-73 are also shown (+) but detailed weekly records were not obtained.

	Job		% weeks species seen	
	66/68	71/73	85/86	86/87
Black-shouldered Kite	0	0	19	11
Australian Kestrel	0	+	0	3
Spotted Dove	0	0	10	22
Laughing Dove	+	0	87	83
White-tailed Black Cockatoo	+	0	6	3
Galah	0	0	0	11
Ringnecked Parrot	+	+	10	8
Sacred Kingfisher	+	+	3	3
Rainbow Bee-eater	+	0	32	31
Welcome Swallow	+	+	84	83
Tree Martin	+	+	52	58
Richard's Pipit	+	0	3	6
Willie Wagtail	0	0	0	14
Variegated Wren	0	0	42	31
Red Wattlebird	0	+	13	47
Singing Honeyeater	+	+	84	92
Brown Honeyeater	0	0	48	47
White-fronted Chat	+	+	0	0
Striated Pardalote	0	0	0	17
Australian Magpie-lark	0	0	0	3
Grey Butcherbird	0	0	0	3
Australian Raven	0	+	16	3

DISCUSSION

Despite several changes, Pelican Point remains a roosting place for a number of waders on the Swan River. The most significant changes are in the vegetation and access by the general public. In 1936, Serventy reported extensive samphire swamps west of the point and the presence of jarrah and marri trees with *Banksia* and *Casuarina* as the second storey (Serventy 1938). Of these only *Casuarina* is common today. The filling of the swamp in 1936 increased access to the public but this was again limited in 1976 when the fence was built. Meanwhile river traffic has greatly increased with more motor boats and, recently, the popularity of sail boards in the adjacent Melville water. The building of a jetty immediately north of the point has altered the water flow along the point with a tendency for sand to be deposited on the eastern water front and stabilization of the dunes.

These changes have apparently made little difference to the number of species of wader using the beaches. Apart from Pied Oystercatchers and Turnstones, all the waders seen in 1985/87 were seen in 1936, if we accept Serventy's own claim that some birds recorded by him as Great Knot were Red Knot (Serventy 1938). Small parties of Golden Plover but few Grey Plover were reported in 1936; today Grey Plover are frequent but Golden Plover rare. Alexander (1921) had no records for the Grey Plover in the Swan River District and Serventy recorded them as a new species in 1936.

Other species have shown greater changes. In 1936, Hoary-headed Grebe and Coot were common and Little Grass-birds occurred where suitable habitat was present (Serventy 1938). Ducks including Mountain Duck and Grey Teal were seen throughout the year and Blue-winged Shovellers were present for several weeks. Conversely, herons and ibis which were occasionally seen in 1985/87 were not reported by Serventy with the exception of the White-faced Heron. Whistling Kite, Osprey and Swamp Harrier were seen over the point in 1936, whereas Black-shouldered Kite and Australian Kestrel are the only birds of prey reported in 1985/87.

Unfortunately Serventy (1938) did not publish records of passerines and other land birds seen at Pelican Point. Job (1972) saw many of the birds recorded in 1985/87 (Table 2) and in addition observed the Grey-breasted Silver-eye and Laughing Kookaburra. All the species are common in the Perth Metropolitan Area and, apart from the Galah, were recorded by Alexander (1921) in the Swan River District.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the enthusiasm, support and contribution that has been provided by innumerable people over many years in the compilation of bird lists at Pelican Point.

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